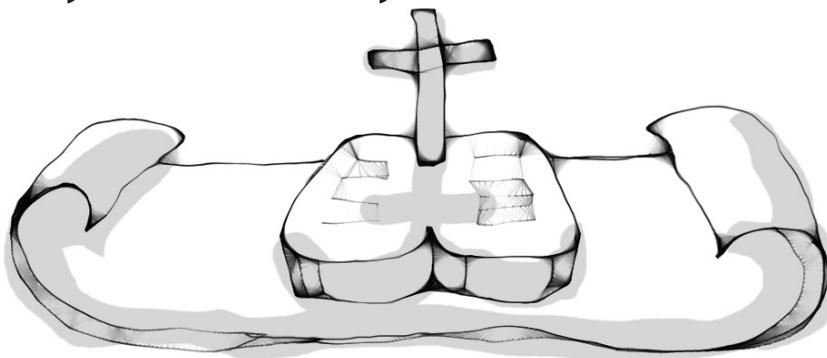


Christ, the Law, and the Gospel



SABBATH—MAY 24

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Romans 7:7–12; Deuteronomy 30:15–20; Matthew 7:24–27; Acts 10:34, 35; John 15:10; Ephesians 2:1.

MEMORY VERSE: “Moses gave us the law. Jesus Christ has given us grace and truth” (John 1:17, NIV).

ONE HUNDRED YEARS BEFORE CHRIST, THE ROMAN POET LUCRETIUS WROTE A FAMOUS POEM. It was lost in history until it was found in the Middle Ages. It was called “On the Nature of Things.” Often Lucretius was accused of being an atheist.¹ But in his poem he did not deny that there were gods. He just argued that the gods would have no interest in anything human because they were gods.

But the Bible argues that there is only one God. And He is interested in what happens here on earth. Two examples of His great interest in people are found in His law and in His grace.² His law is meant to guide how we live. And His grace is His method of saving us even though we have broken that law. Law and grace seem opposed to each other. But the two are always connected. Their methods of operation may be different. But together they show that righteousness (holiness) must have victory over sin. The examples of God's law and His grace give powerful proof of His love for people and His desire to save us into His eternal kingdom.

DEFINITIONS

1. atheist—someone who does not believe in God.

2. grace—God's gift of mercy and forgiveness that He freely gives us to take away our sins.

SIN AND THE LAW (Romans 7:7–12)

Read Romans 7:7–12. What is Paul saying about the relationship between sin and the law? Why would he even ask such a question as, “Is the law sin?” (Romans 7:7, NKJV).

Paul connects the law and sin so closely that he asks this question, “Is the law sin?” The answer is No! He ends by saying, “So the law is holy. The commandment also is holy and right and good” (verse 12, NIV). The “so” points out the strength of his argument. The argument is that the law is *not* sin. Instead, it is really holy and good.

What Paul says is the same as the relationship between criminal law and crime. An action is thought of as criminal only if there is a law against it. You might go to jail in one country for doing something. But in another country that same thing may be legal. Why? One country has a law that does not permit that action. But the other does. It is the same action but with two different results. What makes the difference? The law.

Here is another important point to remember. Just because something is a man-made law does not make it good. For example, in early America, a law required people to return escaped slaves to their masters. It was the law. But it was not a fair one. We know that human laws are flawed when compared to God’s law. In the case of God’s law, we know that what He asks of us points out His loving character (holiness; who God is). So, Paul’s words are that the law is holy and good. What else could it be? This is because God created it.

What importance is there in the commandment that Paul uses in Romans 7:7 to prove his point about the law? Why does Paul use that commandment instead of another, such as “Thou shalt not steal”?

Perhaps Paul uses that commandment instead of some of the others because it may not be so clear to others that it is wrong. Murder, stealing, yes! A person does not usually need the Ten Commandments to know that. But coveting?³ So, it is a perfect example of Paul’s point: it is the law that shows us what sin is. Without it, Paul might not have known that coveting was wrong.



Just because something is a law does not make it good. For example, in early America, a law required people to return escaped slaves to their masters.

DEFINITIONS

3. coveting—desiring something that belongs to someone else.

THE LAW AND ISRAEL (Deuteronomy 30:15–18)

The giving of the law to Israel was God’s special act. Before He gave the law to Moses, God reminded His people that they are “ ‘a kingdom of priests to serve me. You will be my holy nation’ ” (Exodus 19:6, NIV). Among all nations on the face of the earth, it was to Israel that God specially showed His law (Romans 9:4). The law was not designed to be a burden to the people but to be a tool. The chosen nation would use this tool to show the rest of the nations the code (rules) that is the foundation of God’s government. Israel was to be a partner with God in preaching the gospel to the world. And God’s law was to be the badge of authority for His workers who spread His message of love.

According to Deuteronomy 30:15–20, what is the relationship between the law and the promises given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? Also, even more important, how can we use these principles (important rules) under the new covenant?⁴ Read Matthew 7:24–27.

God chose Israelites to be His representatives. Israel would be the people who would share with the nations of the earth the blessings promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But the blessings were not automatic. As a chosen nation, Israel was expected to follow the Lord’s will. Moses made it clear that life and success would come to the people only if they obeyed God’s “commands, rules and laws” (Deuteronomy 30:16, NIV).

We have read many stories of rebellion (turning from God) that spoil Israel’s history. So, Israel as a nation failed to obey God’s commandments. But we must not forget that “everyone has sinned. No one measures up to God’s glory [perfection]” (Romans 3:23, NIV). No nation on earth has perfectly obeyed the will of God. Even in recent history, nations that claim to be Christian have failed to obey God. They have been guilty of starting wars and making people suffer.

In your own experience, how are obedience and faith related? When you obey, what happens to your faith, or what happens when you disobey? How does obedience make faith stronger?

DEFINITIONS

4. covenant—a promise or an agreement between God and His people.

THE LAW AND THE NATIONS (Acts 10:34, 35)

Read Acts 10:34, 35; Acts 17:26, 27; Romans 1:20; and Romans 2:14. What is the main point or teaching of these verses?

Israel made mistakes. But God did not leave the people in other nations without a witness. Those who did not have opportunities to receive God's written messages received His messages through nature (Romans 1:20). God's book of nature holds enough information to lead a person to Him.

God has also put a measure of spiritual desire in every person. According to Paul, those who sense God's Spirit will start a search to find Him (Acts 17:27). So many people feel that their lives are empty. This is because nothing this world offers—fame, power, money, sex—can help them spiritually. At its heart, this was the message of the book of Ecclesiastes. This empty feeling can lead people to search for something that is spiritual. They are attracted to truth in a desire to satisfy their empty souls.

God's will is described through the Bible or nature. Either way, the person who receives it has the responsibility to live it. Truth is truth, no matter who shares it. Those who try to cover up the truth will experience the wrath (anger) of God (Romans 1:18). Many people may not have received the Bible or the Ten Commandments. But God still holds them responsible for the parts of truth that they *have* learned. Finally, everyone will be judged. And the standard (basis; set of rules) of judgment will be law. It will be the law of God, given through His prophet (special messenger) Moses. Or it will be the law of conscience for those who do not know of the written law. The law of conscience has been developed by listening to God's voice in nature.

What great disappointments have you faced that have helped you to understand just how untrustworthy and unsatisfactory the things of this world really can be? How can you learn from these disappointments about what is really important?



Nature is God's second Bible, showing His love and truth.

GRACE AND TRUTH (John 1:17)

The gift that Jesus desires to give to all people is eternal life.

John shortened the history of salvation into one verse. “Moses gave us the law. Jesus Christ has given us grace and truth” (John 1:17, NIV). As a result of Adam’s sin, all people have had to die. This is because no one born to human parents, except Jesus, has been free from sin. So, God chose a people to whom He gave His law. God expected them to be His light to the other nations. God did not give the law to Israel to save them but to remind them of their need for His righteousness.

What do Philippians 2:8; John 15:10; and Matthew 26:39 tell us about the kind of life that Jesus lived?

The first Adam disobeyed the command of God. By so doing, the entire world fell into confusion and slavery. On the other hand, through His obedient life, the Second Adam, Jesus, came to save the world from the slavery that the first Adam had brought. When Jesus walked this earth, He surrendered His own will to the will of His Father and chose not to sin. The first Adam brought guilt into the world. But Jesus brought in “grace and truth.” Grace and truth did not replace the law. Jesus showed why the law alone was not enough to receive salvation. The truth that He brought was a more complete understanding of grace.

According to Romans 6:23 and Ephesians 2:8, what is the nature of the grace that starts in Jesus? How did Jesus give grace to humans?

The Greek word translated as “grace” (*charis*) can also mean “gift.” Grace is related to the word for joy (*chara*). The gift that Jesus desires to give all people is eternal life. Plus, grace shows itself as the presence of Christ within us, helping us to take part in the righteousness that the law asks of us. Paul says that in overcoming sin in His life, Jesus has made it possible for us to “do everything the law requires” (Romans 8:4, NIV). Grace frees us from the curse of the law and helps us to keep the law in the way that God expects us to do.

THE LAW AND THE GOSPEL (Romans 1:16, 17)

No matter how “good” our lives are, no one can escape sin. Sadly, happiness is spoiled by sickness, death, or accidents. For so many of us, feelings of spiritual safety are often challenged by memories of past sins. Even worse, we may be bothered by the urge to sin again.

In what ways do Romans 6:23; Romans 7:24; and Ephesians 2:1 describe the influence of sin?

A person living in sin is just a walking corpse. He or she is just waiting for the day when the last breath leaves his or her body. When Paul sums up the human condition, he cries out sadly, “Who will save me from this sin that brings death to my body?” (Romans 7:24, NIV). This is a cry for freedom from unrighteousness (an unholy life). Paul quickly understands that freedom comes through Jesus (Romans 7:25).

This is the gospel. The good news is that we who have been trapped in bodies of sin can be covered with the righteousness of Christ. The gospel is the guarantee that we can escape the judgment of the law because we now have the righteousness that the law encourages us to have (Romans 8:1).

When Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, the story of Jesus’ death was still being taught throughout the Roman Empire. Those who had heard knew very well that the way Jesus had died was terrible and shameful. People whose loved ones had been executed on a cross were often left to a life of shame. But Paul and countless other Christians understood that Christ’s “shameful” death was the most powerful event in human history. That is why Paul says, “I am not ashamed of the good news. It is God’s power. And it will save everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16, NIV). And the heart of that gospel is the great promise that in the end death will not be final. Those saved by Jesus will live forever in a new earth.

Many people believe that life is meaningless because it always ends in death. So, nothing we do is important in the long run. It is hard to argue with that reasoning, is it not? If everything we have ever done and every person we have ever influenced will all be forever lost and forgotten, what can life mean?



A person living in sin is just a walking corpse.

ADDITIONAL STUDY: Read Ellen G. White, “Preaching the Distinctive Truths,” pages 231, 232, in *Evangelism*;⁵ “The Faith That Works;” “How Faith Is Made Perfect,” pages 88, 89, in *The Faith I Live By*.

“Let the subject be made clear that it is not possible to change anything in how we stand before God or in the gift of God to us. Should faith and works buy the gift of salvation for anyone, then the Creator is under debt to the person. Here is an opportunity for lies to be accepted as truth. Suppose any man can earn salvation by anything he may do. Then he does the same as the Catholics do. Through penance,⁶ the Catholics ‘buy’ forgiveness for their sins. If true, then salvation is part of debt that may be earned as wages. But man cannot, by any of his good works, earn salvation. So, it must be wholly of grace. Salvation must be received by man as a sinner because he receives and believes in Jesus. It is fully a free gift. No doubt, justification⁷ by faith is given fully and freely. And all these arguments about our works saving us are ended. Then this issue about fallen man earning from good works is settled. He can never gain eternal life from good works.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Faith and Works*, pages 19, 20.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① Think deeply about the Ellen G. White statement above that you have just read from *Faith and Works*. Think through the wonderful and hopeful truths found in these words for even the worst of sinners. How can we learn to claim these promises for ourselves and live as if we really believe them?
- ② God gave His law to Israel through Moses. But the Bible suggests that God uses other methods to show His will to people who may not have the Bible (for example, Romans 1:20; Romans 2:14; Acts 17:26, 27). If God does speak to all people, what are missionaries and evangelists for?
- ③ John 1:17 says that “grace and truth” started with Jesus Christ. Using that verse, many people put the law in opposition to “grace and truth.” Why is this false? In what ways do the law and “grace and truth” all work together to show us the character of God as shown in the plan of salvation?

DEFINITIONS

5. evangelism—going from place to place to share the good news that Jesus saves us from our sins.

6. penance—something that you do or are given to do (by a priest) to show that you are sad or sorry about doing something wrong.

7. justification—cleansing from sin and full forgiveness from God.